New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1947

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1947 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres in Other Years
Original Reviews Appeared in These Volumes

1946 Vol.

Stage Play	*Page*
Androcles and the Lion	217
*Annie Get Your Gun	382
Another Part of the Forest	247
Beggar's Holiday	204
*Born Yesterday	466
*Burlesque	208
*Call Me Mister	403
Christopher Blake	235
Cyrano de Bergerac	321
Fatal Weakness (The)	251
*Happy Birthday	280
Henry VIII	271
Iceman Cometh (The)	315
Joan of Lorraine	255
John Gabriel Borkman	263
Lady Windermere's Fan	307
Lovely Me	211
Made In Heaven	292
O Mistress Mine	474
Park Avenue	275
Playboy of the Western World (The)	287
Pound on Demand	217
Present Laughter	283
Show Boat	496
Temper the Wind	197
Toplitzky of Notre Dame	201
What Every Woman Knows	268
Wonderful Journey	214
Years Ago	229

1945 Vol.

Carousel	226
Red Mill (The)	141
State of the Union	102

1944 Vol.

Anna Lucasta	143
*Harvey	95

1943 Vol.

*Oklahoma	341
*Voice of the Turtle (The)	199

1940 Vol.

Life With Father	457

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 3, 1947*

1947 PRODUCTIONS

Premieres During 1947
Reviews Appear in This Volume

Stage Play	*Page*
Alice in Wonderland	398
*All My Sons	475
*Allegro	300
As You Like It	451
Barefoot Boy With Cheek	402
Bathsheba	415
Big Two (The)	494
*Brigadoon	427
Chocolate Soldier (The)	431
*Command Decision	328
Craig's Wife	457
Dear Judas	315
*Druid Circle (The)	288
Duet for Two Hands	312
Eagle Has Two Heads (The)	421
*Finian's Rainbow	486
Hamlet	447
Heads or Tails	377
*Heiress (The)	335
*High Button Shoes	304
*How I Wonder	332
I Gotta Get Out	343
Importance of Being Earnest (The)	439
*Inspector Calls (An)	291
It Takes Two	469
*John Loves Mary	465
King Lear	453
Laura	353
Little A	483
Louisiana Lady	362
Love for Love	367
Love Goes to Press	497
Magic Touch (The)	348
*Man and Superman	308
*Medea	295
Medium (The)	379
Merchant of Venice (The)	450
Message for Margaret	393
Miracle in the Mountains	387
*Music In My Heart	324
Open House	359
Our Lan'	339
Parlor Story	436
Portrait in Black	371
Story of Mary Surratt (The)	461
Street Scene	490
Sweethearts	479
Telephone (The)	379
Tenting Tonight	406
Under the Counter	320
Volpone	448
*Winslow Boy (The)	285
Whole World Over (The)	411
Yellow Jack	443
*Young Man's Fancy (A)	383

Critics' Circle Award 392
Pulitzer Award 376

**Asterisks indicate shows scheduled to play week of November 3, 1947*

THEATRE OPENINGS

"The Winslow Boy"

Theatre Critics Reviews brings you each week the complete reviews as they originally appeared in these New York newspapers

NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN — NEW YORK WORLD-TELEGRAM
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS — NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK MIRROR — NEW YORK NEWSPAPER PM
NEW YORK SUN — NEW YORK POST — NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Winslow Boy"

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

OCTOBER 30, 1947

By HOWARD BARNES

Memorable Theater

TERENCE Rattigan's "The Winslow Boy," which has come to the Empire Theater from London, is richly satisfying drama. In it the author has dramatized a celebrated defense of individual rights with deep feeling, humor and passion. It has been produced here immaculately by showmen who know the stage on both sides of the Atlantic and it is crowded to the outer edges of four scenes with triumphant acting. The decor and the direction are all of a piece with a work of scope, imagination and cumulative emotional power. The season is in grateful debt to the English stage for this offering.

* * *

The author has chosen no easy task. Best known for such urbane comedies as "French Without Tears," or "O Mistress Mine," he has subordinated his comic talents to the relating of a father's fight for his son's honor which had all England by its ears shortly before the first world war. With unerring craftsmanship, he has transmuted the records of that case into a challenging and memorable piece of theater which speaks a common and abiding language in its declaration of personal liberty. Since he has not forgotten his gift of wit, "The Winslow Boy" is uncommonly entertaining as well as moving.

* * *

Although episodic in outline, as it moves through nearly two years, the action is singularly cohesive and sustained. It is all set in the drawing room of a house in Kensington, where a stern English banker learns that his youngest son has been expelled from a naval academy on a charge of stealing, believes the boy's plea of innocence and wages a stubborn struggle for his vindication. As the lords of the admiralty refuse to have the conviction reviewed, one member of his family after another considers his crusade idiotic, until only his daughter remains by his side, joined in time by a valiant advocate. The personal issue is gradually engulfed in the fight for individual right until the final scene is electric with moving excitement and meaning.

* * *

The dimensions of this stirring work are fully plumbed by the players. Alan Webb is caustically superb as the elder Winslow, who only wavers in his struggle when it jeopardizes his daughter's engagement to a stuffy colonel's son. As the loyal girl, Valerie White brings indignation and dignity to a characterization which will not soon be lost in the limbo of past performances. And Frank Allenby, as the cold, courageous barrister, who sacrifices advancement for the winning of the Winslow case, is magnificent. Michael Newell has a tendency to overdo as the lad of the title, but Madge Compton is excellent as the bewildered mother and Betty Sinclair has a wonderful scene in the ending as a maid who brings good tidings. Glen Byam Shaw has staged the drama cunningly, while Michael Weight's setting and costumes are exactly right. "The Winslow Boy" is a fine and eloquent play, interpreted with the zeal and enchantment it should have inspired.

'THE WINSLOW BOY.'

Play by Terence Rattigan; staged by Glen Byam Shaw; decor by Michael Weight; presented by Atlantis Productions—the Theater Guild, H. M. Tennent, Ltd., John C. Wilson, at the Empire Theater Wednesday evening, October 29, 1947. The cast:

Ronnie Winslow	Michael Newell
Violet	Betty Sinclair
Grace Winslow	Madge Compton
Arthur Winslow	Alan Webb
Catherine Winslow	Valerie White
Dickie Winslow	Owen Holder
John Watherstone	Michael Kingsley
Desmond Curry	George Benson
Miss Barnes	Dorothy Hamilton
Fred	Leonard Michell
Sir Robert Morton	Frank Allenby

SYNOPSIS—The action takes place in Arthur Winslow's house in Kensington, London, shortly before the first World War. Act I—Scene 1: A Sunday morning in July. Scene 2: An afternoon in April (nine months later). Act II—Scene 1: An evening in January (nine months later). Scene 2: An afternoon in June (five months later).

Daily Mirror

OCTOBER 30, 1947

'The Winslow Boy' Is Fine Play

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Atlantis Productions—the Theatre Guild, H. M. Tennent, Ltd., and John C. Wilson—brought to the Empire Theatre last evening a London hit, "The Winslow Boy," the best play yet to come from the pen of Terence Ratigan.

It is a play notable for integrity, honesty and decent emotions. It is a production notable for uniformly fine acting. It is a tribute to justice, something all too often lacking on parts of this globe today.

"The Winslow Boy" is based on a real case history. A cadet at an English naval school was expelled, without a fair trial, for the theft of a small sum of money.

Convinced of the boy's innocence, his family made sacrifices to cut tons of red-tape and insure him a day in court. And an eminent lawyer in England refused preferment to successfully right the injustice done the lad.

The case caused a furore in England at the time, circa 1912. There were those who couldn't understand why such a fuss should be made over such a trifling matter. But honor did not seem a trifling matter to the Winslows and Sir Robert Morton (really Sid Edward Carson?).

In these free and easy days, when parental discipline, filial respect and family loyalties are in eclipse, it is appropriate that "The Winslow Boy" should be presented as a reminder of an era in which standards of conduct were not taken lightly.

You will walk the length of Broadway and not find acting superior to that in "The Winslow Boy."

There are exceptional performances by Frank Allenby, as Sir Robert; Alan Webb, as Arthur Winslow, and Valerie White, as Catherine Winslow. And there are performances that would grace any production by Madge Compton, Michael Newell, Owen Holder, Michael Kingsley, George Benson and Betty Sinclair.

Miss Sinclair has the skimpy role of a maid, but she makes it seem a vital part of the ensemble.

Director Glen Byam Shaw will likely be deluged with offers to remain here and stage other productions.

"The Winslow Boy" is a stimulating and rewarding script, beautifully brought to life by an admirable cast.

DAILY NEWS

OCTOBER 30, 1947

'The Winslow Boy' Genteel and Boresome British Prize Winner

By JOHN CHAPMAN

It has taken three separate managements — London's H. M. Tennent Ltd., and New York's Theatre Guild and John C. Wilson—to import from Britain a Brussels sprout titled "The Winslow Boy," which had its local debut last evening at the Empire Theatre.

Being a newspaper reader, I have long been aware that Britain has been having little in the way of food, clothing, tobacco and American money. And it can't be having very much in the way of shows, either, if "The Winslow Boy" can have had—as it really did—a long West End run and the British equivalent of the Pulitzer prize, the Ellen Terry Award. Things must have been really tough over there before we lend-leased "Oklahoma."

"The Winslow Boy" is a frightfully genteel and more than faintly tedious account of a family defending the good name of a small boy who has been discharged from a naval prep school on the charge of forging a signature on a five-shilling money order. The case is fought all the way up to the House of Commons—where it is won, of course, amid the plaudits of a great crowd—and it is just about as exciting as watching a pillow fight.

Junior Dreyfus Case.

Terence Rattigan, who wrote

"The Winslow Boy"—*continued*

"O Mistress Mine," is the author. "Mistress" was a hollow little comedy blessed by the inspired horseplay of Lunt and Fontanne. In "The Winslow Boy" Mr. Rattigan gets serious and challenges the right of the British Admiralty to sack a schoolboy without a full examination of the facts.

The period is just before World War I, which seems to be the theatrical fashion this year (and I may say I'm getting tired of it, as well as of the equally popular 1920s, because the women's dresses are so godawful). The style of writing seems as quaint as the clothing, morever. In one of the more stirring moments of Mr. Rattigan's junior-size Dreyfus case, a young man announces to his father that he has enlisted in the Territorial Army and the old man wants to know why.

"There's a fair chahnce," says the youth, "of a bit of a scrap."

The imported English company is nice enough, I suppose. It includes Alan Webb, Madge Compton, Owen Holder, Valerie White and Frank Allenby. But all their well-mannered endeavors fail to dissuade me from believing that "The Winslow Boy" is a bit of a bore.

The New York Times

OCTOBER 30, 1947

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Terrence Rattigan's "The Winslow Boy" put on at the Empire last evening, is such a good play that one naturally wishes it could have been perfect. On the theme of a callous injustice done to a small boy, Mr. Rattigan has written a stunning first act. Glen Byam Shaw, as director, has taken the pains to see that it is stunningly acted by a talented English company. In the second act the company maintains at a high level the sort of expert acting a good English company can provide when the parts are imaginatively cast and the details of the performance are immaculately finished.

But the second act of "The Winslow Boy" fritters away the genuine emotion of the theme with some shabby theatrical devices. Since the injustice done "The Winslow Boy" by an omnipotent bureaucracy has a general moral value for today, it would be a blessing if Mr. Rattigan could finish it on its highest level. What we are getting is an admirably acted theatre piece with some deeply-moving situations.

* * *

At the age of 13 Ronnie Winslow has been sacked from a naval school for stealing money. He professes to be innocent. Although his father is a severe man, he loves and believes his son and starts legal proceedings to have his son's innocence publicly established. He is dealing, not with a private institution, but with the Government, which has a wide latitude of immunity against legal actions by individual citizens. The case of the Winslow boy becomes, first, an obsession with his father, second, a matter of debate in Parliament and, finally, a national issue involving the rights of private citizens against official despotism. Although Mr. Rattigan is no rabble-rouser, he is fully aware of the implications of his theme.

In terms of family portraiture he is a skillful and affecting writer. He knows how to contrast a frightened boy's bewilderment against the settled convictions of an English home. Since the character of the father is admirably drawn in terms of probity and compassion, these early scenes inside the Winslow home are heartbreaking in their simplicity and directness. Mr. Rattigan cheapens it a trifle with the studied flamboyance of an impromptu cross-examination by a bombastic jurist. And in the second act he gives you the standard retribution scenes as though he had been studying Pinero. This would not matter if the first act of "The Winslow Boy" did not have so much sweep and character. For it is disillusioning to discover that Mr. Rattigan is only a practicing playwright when the occasion calls for an artist.

* * *

But there will be no belittling of the performance in these columns. Meticulously directed with a fine sense of the theatre, it is superb. As the father, Alan Webb is giving a magnificent performance of severity and kindliness by turns, and in excellent taste withal. Valerie White is playing the part of a serious-minded daughter with a sincerity that puts roots down deeper as the evening progresses. As the eminent jurist, Frank Allenby plays a stuffed-shirt with the theatrical flourishes Mr. Rattigan has written into the part; and let's not pretend that they are not generally effective. Michael Newell plays the Winslow lad with a shrill-voice and a boyish pride that is altogether winning. George Benson acts a fussy little lawyer with decent humility. Madge Compton, Betty Sinclair, Owen Holder and Michael Kingsley agreeably round out the Winslow family and its appurtenances.

In its best scenes "The Winslow Boy" is a harrowing statement of a human situation, and some of the finest work of the season. But the triumph of the Winslow cause comes straight out of the journeyman theatre. Mr. Rattigan's hackneyed technique very nearly conquers his convictions in his anti-climactic conclusion.

The Sun

OCTOBER 30, 1947

By WARD MOREHOUSE.

'Winslow Boy' Moving, Adroitly Played.

Terence Rattigan, in dramatizing a case which once jolted the British Empire, has written a lot of good theater into a leisurely, family-life play, "The Winslow Boy," skillfully played last night by an all-London cast upon the stage of our revered Empire. It has been ably directed by Glen Byam Shaw.

"The Winslow Boy" goes its way placidly, sometimes coming to almost a full stop—its characters are nearly always talking of off-stage happenings—and it is considerably better in its first half than in its second. But it is a play of warmth and affection and many of its scenes are genuinely moving. One of them, in which a crafty and inexorable lawyer subjects a 14-year-old to an unsparing inquisition, is almost heartbreaking.

Rattigan turns from the light-headed comedy of "O Mistress Mine" to a theme of more substance in making a play of the Archer-Shee case. His "Winslow Boy" recites its story of the battle of an aggrieved father to clear the name of his son, and it becomes a fight for a principle and for human liberty, a case of the commoner versus the King.

The father, a retired bank official of modest means, believes utterly in the innocence of young Ronnie, who was dismissed from the Naval academy, charged with the theft of a five-shilling postal money order. Eminent counsel is engaged and the head of the house of Winslow withstands the scorn of neighbors and wrecks his health and his bank account as he wages his struggle against bureaucratic inertia and the obstinacy of the Admiralty. In the end, the Winslow boy defeats the Crown.

Alan Webb is thoroughly believable as Arthur Winslow, a sufferer from advanced arthritis, whose two-year fight in behalf of his son, and in the cause of right, throws the House of Commons into an uproar. Frank Allenby, a towering man, with all the impassivity of William Gillette, is extraordinarily good as Sir Robert Morton, cold and austere but very human, who takes over the defense of Ronnie.

Valerie White brings a great deal of conviction to the role of the suffragette daughter; it's her strength that keeps her shattered father from giving up the fight, and she sacrifices her own romance to stay in it. Michael Newell is excellent as Ronnie—he certainly convinced me that he never took that money order—and so is Owen Holder, playing the older brother. George Benson has a tremendously affecting proposal scene.

The scene of "The Winslow Boy" is the Winslow house in Kensington, London, just before the outbreak of the first world war and the story that it projects is one that undoubtedly has greater significance for British audiences than it will have for those of this country. But Terence Rattigan has turned it into a play of force and dignity, and it is played with distinction by a new acting group from West End.

The London theater which has had some rough going in New York this season, looked better last night at the Empire.

New York World-Telegram

OCTOBER 30, 1947

'The Winslow Boy' Is Deeply Moving Play

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Winslow Boy" is a winner in any field. It is a shrewd play, compelling, suspenseful and inspiring. It is both acted and staged with the deepest appreciation.

This British story, based on fact in a setting before World War I, comes here at a peculiarly appropriate moment. Its whole conflict springs from the democratic right of a citizen to a just defense in his trial by a special governmental bureau.

A 14-year-old student at a naval college is found guilty of stealing, forging and cashing a five shilling postal order. He is dismissed.

His father's belief in the boy's truthfulness begins a long, ugly, costly battle. At length the conviction is upheld at an Admiralty inquiry in which the boy had no representation of any kind.

This inflames the father, Arthur Winslow, to a heartbreaking fight through the House of Commons to get, over the head of the Admiralty, a Petition of Right which will permit a jury trial of the case. The form of the petition reads "Let Right Be Done."

To all concerned except the father, it is in this quotation that the real issue lies. They recognize the passing effect on a boy of a youthful misdemeanor, but cannot stomach the frightening methods by which he was convicted. Arthur's concern is justice for his son.

As the moving spirit of the struggle, there is no cost the father will not bear. He loses his health, devoting most of his money to his cause until he comes perilously close to sacrificing his wife's loyalty. He denies his elder son his education, and calls down ridicule on his name until his daughter's fiance jilts her.

This is not a play about extraordinary people in the sense that they ever allow themselves to feel noble. They are intelligent and thoughtful, driven to infinite action when a wrong touches home.

Mr. Rattigan has done a brilliant job. He indulges in no heroics or flamboyance. Consequently his play never for a moment fails to be human and moving.

No event of the long case is depicted. This story is the personal one where homely values are distended or dissolved by the public exposure of this family's stakes. To preserve this intimate and deeply touching quality of the play's drama, Mr. Rattigan has had to employ as much exposition as the Greeks. But he has dramatized it with such skill, in vivid causes and effects, that one is never conscious of the recounting of an event.

The play is ripe with comedy. If it is often supercilious, one knows these people are concealing emotions fearfully deep. They have no genuine scorn.

The prospective barrister's inquisition, the proposal, and the revelation of the trial's outcome are in varied ways masterpieces of emotional content.

The British cast is exceptional. Alan Webb as the father is salty and tragic, and gallant, while Frank Allenby makes the barrister a touching figure with his studied repression and his ruthless fire.

Valerie White is surprisingly forthright for one so lovely, as the suffragette sister, giving her role warmth and deliberateness.

Young Michael Newell delivers with emotional impact as the convicted student, and the others are right as rain.

Journal American

OCTOBER 30, 1947

New British Import Skillful Production

By ROBERT GARLAND

This season, as well as the two before, the Empire is the New York showshop of Terence Rattigan, the London dramatist. This season his occupancy is apt to be of less remunerative duration. He has no American acting team to come to his assistance.

Last night, without a Lunt or Fontanne to bless him, Mr. Rattigan displayed his "The Winslow Boy" on the venerable Broadway stage where, a year ago, his "O Mistress Mine" ("Love in Idleness" to Londoners) was in its second season.

Imported for the carriage trade by Atlantis Productions (trademark of The New York Theatre Guild, H. M. Tennent, Limited, of London, and John C. Wilson, of Lawrenceville, New Jersey) "The Winslow Boy" is as English as a spot of tea and crumpets.

For two acts (twice that many scenes) it goes its leisurely lend-lease way, seldom raising its genteel voice to disturb the young Ronnie Winslow of the title as he sleeps in an easy chair supplied by Old Times Furnishers.

Frankly, along about the middle of the final stanza, I had a feeling that a couple of members of The Drama Critics Circle were about to join him!

• • •

Dad Never Wavers

Not I, however. I, industrious and starry-eyed, sat upright in my Empire stall and watched young Ronnie Winslow doze while his father, mother, brother and sister, worry themselves into poverty and ill health over his alleged thievery.

Ronnie has been accused of five shillings' worth of dishonesty while an undergraduate at Osborn, the British academy for naval cadets. The Winslow Boy himself is vague about it, but his dad, a Gilbert and Sullivan Englishman, never wavers.

He, from July to April, from January to June, is a sort of Right Honorable Sir Joseph Porter, K.C.B. of 1916 Kensington. Assisted by Sir Robert Morton and abandoned by his family, he clears his clouded son's good name.

Not for the five shillings, but for the principle of the thing Ronnie Winslow's arthritic father carries his case from the newspapers to the courts, then to the House of Commons, then to the doorsteps of the King. And wins.

At last night's premiere, papa and I and the carriage trade cared more than Ronnie did. But, after 23 months of fictional participation, we too began to languish.

• • •

Acted With Skill

With not too many members of the London cast, "The Winslow Boy" is acted with skill and deliberation. Under the direction of Glen Byam Shaw, the English atmosphere is painstakingly preserved. Mr. Shaw makes each Englishman do his duty.

At the Empire, each Englishman does! Especially Alan Webb as Kensington's K.C.B. A fine example of a London Clarence Day, he pounds the floor and is good and gruff in an effort to hide the chicken heart beneath his leonine exterior.

But the Sir Robert Morton of Frank Allenby gives me the greatest pleasure. Mr. Allenby's is a characterization to cherish. So is Valerie White's Catherine Winslow. Miss White's "new woman" is likable and well drawn.

The entire cast is well and wisely chosen, although the Ronnie Winslow of young Michael Newell fails to get better as it goes along. But it's the playwright's fault if the boy fades slowly but surely into motivation.

If you are keen for "buying English," "The Winslow Boy" is your imported bill of goods. Thanks to Guild subscriptions, Tennent movie sales and Wilson theatre parties, it is already in the great American bag.